

By Steve Israel.

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LAST Tuesday's State of the Union message offered intriguing rhetoric but little substance on how to actually reduce our addiction to foreign oil. Long Island should position itself to fill this void in our national and economic security concerns. We can do it, because we have in the past.

Drive almost anywhere on Long Island and you will see the reminders of a premier defense and aerospace industry. But that wasn't always the case.

Going into World War II, Long Island adapted its economy to meet urgent national needs. Long Island built the famous aircraft of World War II -- the Avenger, Hellcat and Wildcat. We built the F9F Cougar airplane used during the Korean War, the A-6 Intruder from Vietnam and the F-14 Tomcat used in the Persian Gulf war. And when Neil Armstrong took a giant leap for mankind, it was Long Island's lunar module that landed him on the moon. Now it's time to transform our economy again -- this time in the area of new energy technologies.

The same motivators -- national and economic security -- will drive the next great industry: clean energy jobs. And just as Long Island rose to the challenges presented in the 20th century to become the defense capital of America, we should rise to 21st century challenges by embarking on a strategy of innovation and production in the area of clean energy technologies, including plug-in hybrid and fuel-flexible vehicles, hydrogen fuel cells, wind, water, solar power and biodiesel. We should also be designing and developing "green building" technologies including photovoltaic panels, solar hot water systems and more.

Already we have the building blocks: the Clean Energy Leadership Task Force, an organization created to educate Long Island's municipal governments about clean energy technologies, is doing important work. The Long Island Power Authority is spearheading several clean energy initiatives like the proposed wind farm off the South Shore and a tax-rebate program for homeowners who purchase solar photovoltaic systems for their houses.

Farmingdale State University of New York is conducting research on hydrogen and solar energy. Already the university has converted a gas-powered car to run on a combination of battery and hydrogen power, and it is working on a model house that will be powered by an integrated hydrogen fuel cell and solar energy system. Suffolk is converting significant portions of its fleet of county cars to biodiesel. A prototype hydrogen fuel cell is providing power in Babylon's town hall.

These are all important elements of a regional clean energy strategy. The next step is an effort that more fully integrates Long Island's public and private sectors. We need venture capitalists, universities and researchers, defense contractors and all levels of government to encourage a new generation of clean energy jobs on Long Island.

We can take the first step by persuading towns to pass clean energy bond acts, allowing them to borrow money to finance projects that increase demand for and reduce costs associated with converting municipal buildings and cars to accommodate alternative energy technology. Local research institutions should focus on partnerships with private companies to develop biofuel and solar technologies, and make them commercially viable. Public-private partnerships should create groups that provide assistance and expertise to clean energy businesses on Long Island, spur investment and attract venture capital.

High schools, colleges and business should team up on similar efforts. This summer, Farmingdale State, in conjunction with local high schools, converted an electric television set into one powered by a hydrogen fuel cell.

Meanwhile, Congress should pass legislation that would generate clean energy jobs and eliminate our dependence on foreign oil. For instance, the proposed New Apollo Energy Act, of which I am a co-sponsor, establishes, among other things, tax credits for retooling and building plants that produce energy efficient or alternative fuel-powered vehicles. Will these things guarantee that Long Island becomes the clean energy industry capital of America, as we once considered ourselves the defense capital of America? No. But who would have thought, 60 years ago, that Long Island's economy would help land a man on the moon?